

Jakob Fidelis Ackermann, *On the Physical Differences between Men and Women, excluding the Sexual Organs* (1788)

Abstract

A professor of anatomy and surgery, Jakob Fidelis Ackermann (1765–1815) was famous for dissecting the skeleton of Johannes Bückler (c. 1778–1803), a.k.a. “Schinderhannes,” one of the most legendary of modern German criminals. Ackermann was also renowned for promoting the idea that men and women were not only different in terms of anatomy but also distinctly unequal. This observation came through clearly in this text, his 1788 doctoral dissertation, which was later invoked in the nineteenth century to justify the exclusion of women from public life on the grounds of their biological and mental inadequacies. The following excerpt makes clear that scientific knowledge, when misinterpreted, could have tremendously negative social, cultural, and political ramifications.

Source

§.I. Consideration of what has been said up to now about the difference between the sexes.

Despite many great efforts by dissectors of varying degrees of merit, the physiologist today still lacks knowledge of much concerning the structure and constitution of the female body.^[1]

The two sexes have always been differentiated from one another, and numerous commentaries based on the difference have been written. However, most of these commentaries are wanting in reliability and certainty.^[2] I am intentionally passing over the ancients’ dreamy thoughts on this subject; they are all the more striking because they originated with men whose wisdom was acknowledged as superior to that of so many others.^[3]

The people who examined the female body with regard to differences found nothing except softer flesh,^[4] less significant warmth and dryness,^[5] shorter body length on average,^[6] greater flabbiness of the skin and cellular tissue,^[7] a larger quantity of the latter,^[8] a hairless chin, greater flexibility and more ability to stretch,^[9] not counting the birth organs.

§.II. If the incompleteness of this examination is to be remedied, then the essential characteristics of all parts should be considered.

The differences listed here alone are not nearly enough for the physiologist; he demands other, more important differences that reveal the basic characteristics from which the other attributes merely flow. He searches for the differences that are at the body’s very foundation, in its solid, unquestionably strongest part, i.e., the skeleton, because the connection among all the body’s parts means that a change in the basic structure must necessarily produce a number of changes in the associated parts.^{[10][11]}

§.III. Completely female build.

Nevertheless, it always remains true, and I consider it essential to remember, that even the individual limbs of each sex deviate from one another; indeed, there are male bodies whose structure is closer to a woman’s, just as

there are female bodies whose structure is closer to a man's.^[12]* However, there are members of the fair sex who, on account of the perfection of their specific build, deserve to be called completely feminine, and in whom everything that I will present in greater detail in the course of this study seems complete and unified. Indeed, the most perfect examples of this specific build, in particular, are found in female bodies in which the parts that are designed to perform the main functions of the female sex are most perfectly formed. I have always observed that those female bodies that are most beautiful and feminine in all their parts had a pelvis that was larger relative to the rest of the body.

NOTES

[1] [Bernhard Siegfried] Albin[us] already complains about the considerable lack of dissections in the preface to his *Annotationum academicarum*, Vol. I, p. 7, where he states: We are still in want of analysis and precise examination of the female skeleton (*caremus sceleto feminino*). Furthermore, according to Albin, the otherwise very meritorious men [Pierre] Tarin in his *Ostéographie* (Paris, 1753) and [Jean-Joseph] Sue in *Traité d'Ostéologie traduit de l'Anglois de Mr. Monro* (Paris, 1759) did not accomplish nearly as much as is needed, given the importance of the subject.

[2] To these belong Heinr[ich] Corn[elius] Agrippa's *De nobilitate et praecellentia feminei sexus* (Coloniae, 1768) and J.P. [Johann Peter] Lotich, *De praestantia sexus feminine*.

[3] Plato maintained that the men who had lived wickedly were turned into women. Aristotle, in his book *De generatione animalium*, called them monsters [...]. Euripides put fire, water, and women in the same category, and called them the three evils. – Simonides maintains that the female sex descended from wolves and other wild animals. See Lotich, loc. cit., p. 30.

[4] Hippocrates in his book on women says: [...]

[5] Hippocrates and Galen cite this almost everywhere. Lud[ovicus] Mercat[us], *De mulierum affectionibus*, in the first book, first chapter of [Israel] Spach, *Collection gynaecorum*.

[6] [George] Martine attributes to them a smaller head than the male sex has, and likens them to animals so that they behave toward men like 14 to 15 [?]; on this see [Albrecht von] Haller in *Elementa Physiologiae*, Vol. XXVII, p. 2.

[7] See Fr[ançois] Thierry [Edmond Thomas Moreau], *Ergo praeter genialia sexus discrepant* (Paris, 1750)

[8] Thierry, loc. cit.

[9] Haller, in *Elementa Physiologiae*, loc. cit.

[10] [Note missing]

[11] The greatest dissector, Mr. von Haller, even suspected that the two sexes differ from one another in their basic parts (*ipsis suis elementis*), see his *Elementa Physiologiae*, Sec. VII, Vol. XXVIII, p. 3.

[12] This diversity regarding the female body is already mentioned by Albin in his book *De sceleto* (Leiden, 1762), Chapter CXXVI, p. 473.

*With amazement, I have seen this cross-over of sexes not infrequently, sometimes only involving one part, but sometimes several at once. Involving one part: I encountered male skulls, but especially one this year, that were just as delicate, just as thin, and pressed together at the temples in the same way as women's skulls, such that the front of the brain was shaped like a woman's brain. Privy Councilor [Samuel Thomas von] Sömmering has found male sternums that are entirely feminine, except that nature remained consistent in making them thicker in the particular circumstances, perhaps because they were smaller. Involving several parts at once: I have frequently seen this, too, after a preceding commentary by my great teacher, and I actually know several more men whom I have good reason to presume are in the same situation. I am

ignoring here the great similarity of various men's faces to women's faces. I also do not wish to touch upon similarities in body shape brought about by similar attire, e.g., long corsets that both women and men use; I had occasion to see the choicest examples of this phenomenon during dissections. Note by the translator [of the original text, which was presumably written in Latin].

Source: Jakob Fidelis Ackermann, *Über die körperliche Verschiedenheit des Mannes vom Weibe, außer den Geschlechtstheilen*. Koblenz: Johann Kaspar Huber, 1788, pp. 1–7. Available online at: <http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/ackermann1788>

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